Fairbury Railroad Depots

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.net
Date: December 29, 2025

Fairbury was founded in 1857, when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid new tracks from Peoria to Indiana. Unfortunately, we do not have any historical records for the period between 1857 and the early 1880s. The first Sanborn Insurance map of Fairbury was not made until 1885, and we only have Blade newspaper archives back to about 1882.

One of the Livingston County history books recounts that John Marsh built a hotel and depot on the west side of Fairbury. This hotel and depot cost $17,000 in 1866, which would be equivalent to $370,400 in today's dollars. Unfortunately, this hotel and depot burned down a few years after it was built.

In 1872, the Chicago & Paducah Railroad laid its tracks from Streator down to Strawn. Just a few years after this second railroad in Fairbury was built, the tracks going south from Fairbury to Strawn were removed. The railroad's name was later changed to the Wabash Railroad.

Alma Lewis James (1899-1979) was a Fairbury historian. She published the first edition of her Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars book in 1967. Alma recounted that by 1875, Fairbury had 12 passenger trains and numerous freight trains each day. In the days of the Paducah Railroad, when Fairbury had three railroad stations, each railroad used the ground floor of a hotel for waiting and baggage rooms. One of them, the Fairbury House, in East Fairbury, had a long wooden platform from its door to the edge of the track. It was built completely across Paducah Avenue and necessitated a detour for anyone going down the street. Still, it was an excellent convenience for the trainmen who lived at the hotel. The girls used to sit on the edges of the platform, waving at the engineers as the trains went by.

Alma recounted that in 1883, the Chicago & Paducah was renamed the Wabash Railroad. To the east of Fairbury, the Paducah tracks crossed Indian Creek on a bridge supported on piles, and a small roundhouse was nearby. When the line was sold, the tracks into Strawn were rerouted to Forrest. The crews of men worked for $1.25 a day and used local teams of oxen to do the grading. They also tore down the small roundhouse, and thereafter all trains used the big one in Forrest.

The Sanborn Insurance Company made maps of many small towns, including Fairbury. This first map of Fairbury was created in 1885. This map notes that there were Depot Grounds south of what is now Veterans Memorial Park. No buildings are shown on this site. By 1885, Paducah Avenue had been renamed Walnut Street.

Sometime around 1890, after the Chicago & Paducah had been sold, the railroad officials and the citizens got together to build a wood-frame, central depot. It had separate waiting rooms for the men, where they might smoke, and one for the ladies, where they could not, but men were allowed to sit in there if they accompanied a lady.

This new depot also had a long wooden platform lit by oil lamps. They exploded sometimes, scattering flaming oil, and it took quick work to keep the place from burning down. The station platform was a favorite loafing place of the men and some of the town toughs. Feminine passengers were often severely shocked by the loud talk and profanity. If the girls were pretty, they were apt to have the added annoyance of receiving "mash" notes from small boys.

The last passenger trains each day in Fairbury arrived at 9 PM. Baldy Eckhart, the owner of the Railroad Restaurant, kept a couch under his counter where his night man might rest until his services were needed. The restaurant also made pies.

There was one major problem with the new wood-frame depot in Fairbury: the privies behind the depot. The Local Record newspaper was quite frank about it: "The first perfume that greets the nostrils of the weary traveler as he slips off the train at Fairbury, is not a very delightful one. It suggests the thought that about two barrels of lime, used with proper discretion in the vicinity of where the fumes originate, would, in a great measure, lessen the chances of death by Asiatic Cholera, of some of Fairbury's citizens." In 1902, Von Tobel sold his unsightly lumberyard, which sat on what is now Veterans Memorial Park. Volunteers filled in this sunken area using dirt brought in by the railroad. The GAR (Grand Army of the Republic) donated the two Civil War cannons that still sit in this park today.

Around 1905, a beautiful new brick depot was built to replace the old wood-frame building. It was "considered one of the finest for a town of its size in the entire state."

The new depot was a respectable place, for the police watched it closely. Loafers were discouraged, drunks were jailed, small boys were in school, and so the depot became a social center. Well before train time, the travelers, suitcases in hand, gathered to purchase their tickets at three cents a mile and take seats in the waiting room, anxious to see who else was going away.

There were always the traveling salesmen, the Fairbury Hotel porter who met the trains with his cart to get the baggage, and, on other mornings, the passengers were usually shoppers and businessmen, generally bound for Peoria.

In the evening, all along the line, the larger social functions were timed to match the train schedule, and a good part of the passengers' fun was the train trip to get there. The reporters from the newspapers were busy inside the depot and on the platform, checking on the comings and goings. There was no chance that a trip, for private business or pleasure, could go unnoticed or unannounced to the town. Their questions could be

annoyingly personal, but any objections to answering them all made a reporter even more insistent.

When the time for the train drew near, the mail bags arrived on the post office cart. The baggage truck was pulled to the edge of the platform.

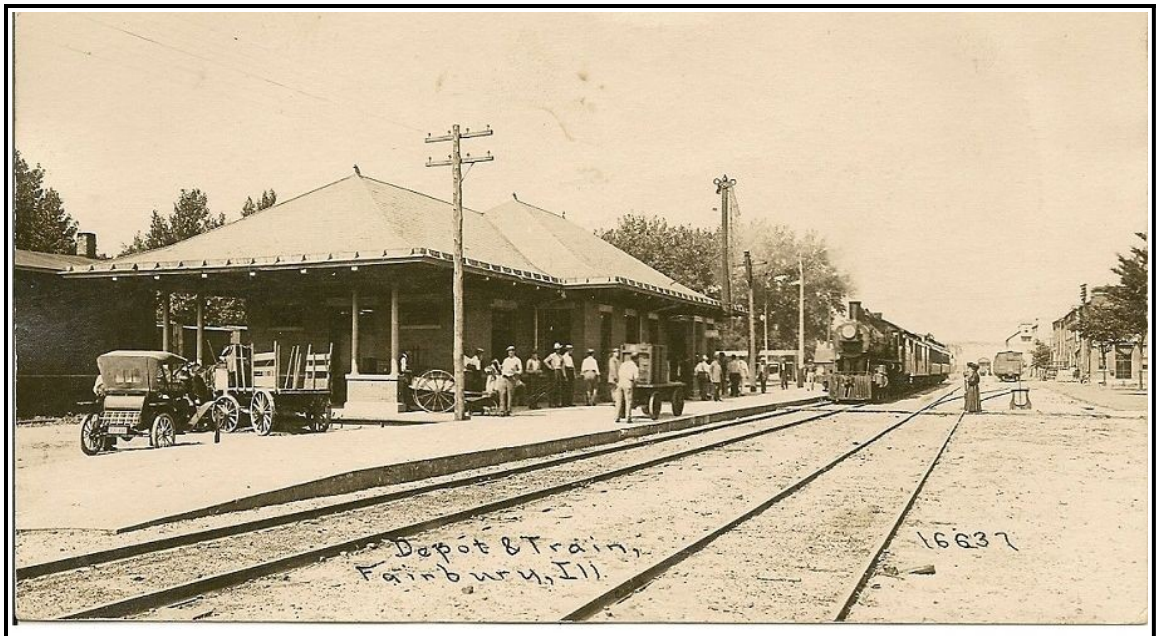
In 1908, postcards with a photo of the new brick Fairbury depot started to be sold. Several of these old postcards still exist today.

Although the people of Fairbury did not realize it at the time, 1908 marked the beginning of the dramatic decline in rail travel. Henry Ford introduced his low-cost Model T, which sparked a dramatic shift toward people driving their own automobiles instead of taking the train.

The 1911 Sanborn map shows the brick depot and a freight depot just south of the passenger depot.

By the late 1920s, passenger traffic had reduced dramatically. The TP&W stopped passenger service to Fairbury around 1933. The brick depot was torn down, and the bricks were used to build the Apostolic Church at the northeast corner of South Eighth and East Elm Streets in Fairbury.

For over seven decades, railroad depots in Fairbury played a crucial role in the transportation system. These depots were also a social gathering spot.



Fairbury's new brick depot circa 1914. This depot was built around 1905 and was of brick construction.